



## Redesigning Neighborhood Change

A Town+Gown Symposia Event

AIA Center for Architecture @ 536 LaGuardia Place, New York

May 13, 2014 (1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.)

**Prelude.** In spring 2012, at its second symposium event entitled, *Creating Sustainable Neighborhoods*,<sup>1</sup> Town+Gown began to focus on issues of planning scale, which, in New York City, ranges from the citywide executive and legislative branches of government down to the smallest unit of government—the community board. At the end of academic year 2011-2012, the research question *How to Create Sustainable Neighborhoods* had generated four projects, supplying the content for this symposium event. To begin the conversation, it became necessary to deconstruct the concept by focusing on three powerful words—create, sustainable and neighborhoods. At the end of the next year, Town+Gown had the occasion to focus again on planning scale at its symposium event in spring 2013, entitled *Planning Sustainable Neighborhoods: Anatomy of a Project—From District One to Microgrid*.<sup>2</sup> The featured project began as a design investigation of complex sustainability-related challenges, using the physical city as a context for design and using design as a strategy, and ended up opening the conversation to include utility infrastructure policy at the national and state scales.<sup>3</sup>

On a parallel track, beginning in fall 2012, with an event entitled *Design: Just What the Heck Is It?*, and continuing a year later with *Policy, Meet Design*<sup>4</sup> in fall 2013, Town+Gown explored the design discipline, one of the disciplines within the built environment interdisciplinary field, that had also been the subject of

two reports by the Center for An Urban Future (CUF).<sup>5</sup> Town+Gown initially considered architecture and several engineering disciplines as belonging within the built environment interdiscipline,<sup>6</sup> but reconsidered its initial ordering after the reports focused attention on allied design fields, such as service, communication and industrial design. At the end of *Policy, Meet Design's* second panel entitled “10 Things Public Policy Analysts Should Know about Design + 10 Things Designers Should Know about Public Policy,” the moderator, David Giles of the CUF and author of the two reports, asked the panelists a provocative question—how would they redesign the city’s community boards?

During the current academic year several projects have emerged that begin to tie these two themes together. At this event, we will discuss these projects and explore the relations among the threads of design, planning scale and the role of the community boards, the level of government in New York City that is closest to the neighborhoods.

**Role of Community Boards.** The question of how to *create* sustainable neighborhoods raised the *a priori* question of “*Who* can create?” While land use planning is one of many local governmental functions that must at some point, of necessity, be performed at the city-wide executive and legislative branches of local government, New York City is physically large, consisting of perhaps as many as 336 distinct neighborhoods, smaller geographical areas

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<sup>1</sup> See Town+Gown website:

[http://www.nyc.gov/html/ddc/downloads/pdf/town\\_and\\_gown/1.%20CURRENT\\_PROGRAM/5.%20PRECIS\\_2.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/ddc/downloads/pdf/town_and_gown/1.%20CURRENT_PROGRAM/5.%20PRECIS_2.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See Town+Gown website:

[http://www.nyc.gov/html/ddc/downloads/pdf/town\\_and\\_gown/Symposia/06-18-13%20Planning%20Sustainable%20Neighborhoods%20Precis.final.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/ddc/downloads/pdf/town_and_gown/Symposia/06-18-13%20Planning%20Sustainable%20Neighborhoods%20Precis.final.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> For more information on ExpoTENTIAL, see <http://expotential.info/>

<sup>4</sup> See Town+Gown website:

[http://www.nyc.gov/html/ddc/downloads/pdf/town\\_and\\_gown/Symposia/10\\_10\\_13\\_Precis.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/ddc/downloads/pdf/town_and_gown/Symposia/10_10_13_Precis.pdf)

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<sup>5</sup> *Growth by Design*, Center for an Urban Future (“CUF”), June 2011 (<http://nycfuture.org/research/publications/growth-by-design>) and *Designing New York's Future*, CUF, March 2012 (<http://nycfuture.org/research/publications/designing-new-yorks-future>).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Chynoweth, *The Built Environment Interdiscipline: A Theoretical Model for Decision Makers in Research and Teaching* (Proceeding of the CIB Working Commission Building Education and Research Conference 2006), <http://www.lawlectures.co.uk/bear2006/chynoweth.pdf>, pp.1-5.

corresponding to our lived reality, a “fragment of the city.”<sup>7</sup> In New York, the functions and relationships of neighborhood activities are defined primarily by the City Charter, which created 59 community districts, whose boards are invested with power to act in land use and in the budget. Yet “[t]he average community district has a population of over 100,000, which makes it comparable in size to Elizabeth, New Jersey, and Albany, New York.”<sup>8</sup>

The City’s governance structure in part reflects the urban planning field’s adoption of Jane Jacobs’s belief that land use planners, versed in techniques, theories and services, need to know “the terms of the precise and unique places in a city with which they are dealing” by turning to “the people of the place” who “understand thoroughly” the specific place.<sup>9</sup> Jacobs coined the term “locality coordination” to describe a vertical communications mechanism that would capture place-based expertise for “locality knowledge in planning, whether the planning is creative, coordinating or predictive.”<sup>10</sup> While Jacobs may have elevated the neighborhood and, in particular, the mechanism of its streets to the subjects and objects of urban planning and the City Charter vests the community boards with locality coordinating powers in land use and in budgeting,<sup>11</sup> the history of the City’s community boards reflects impediments that have made it challenging for community boards to function and for individuals living in neighborhoods to feel they can play an effective role in planning and designing at the neighborhood level.

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<sup>7</sup> See New York City Department of City Planning website (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/neighbor/neighbor.shtml>); Anthony D. King, “Boundaries, Networks, and Cities: Playing and Replaying Diasporas and Histories”, from Alev Çinar and Thomas Bender, editors, *Urban Imaginaries: Locating the Modern City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Municipal Art Society Planning Center on behalf of the Community-Based Planning Task Force, *Livable Neighborhoods for a Livable City*, 2005, p. 11. (<http://mas.org/presscenter/publications/>).

<sup>9</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1993), p. 533.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 543-545.

<sup>11</sup> The 1989 Charter Revision Commission included, as one goal, increasing “. . . the participation of . . . the people in the things [that] affect their lives”, seeking to enhance the ability of community boards to participate in the land use planning process. This goal reflects the tension between two approaches to planning—the professional centralized approach and the community-based planning approach—that is still evolving. Frederick A. O. Schwarz, Jr., and Eric Lane, “The Policy and Politics of Charter Making: The Story of New York City’s 1989 Charter”, *New York Law School Law Review*, Volume XLII, Numbers 3 and 4, 1998, pp. 751-752, 866, 868.

The City’s core processes—land use and budgeting—are technically complex, involving a high degree of politics, many stakeholders and reams of equally complex public data that are hard to understand and use.

Partly as a reaction to the way these institutional pressures played out over time, planning schools and planners themselves turned away from the community boards and drilled down to the neighborhoods to assist in community-based planning, which has lately evolved into place making.<sup>12</sup> This strategy of neighborhood-level planning also dovetailed with the “think global, act local” strategy articulated by the environmental sustainability agenda. Some academics feel that the “horizontal networks of public, private, and non-profit organizations as a phenomenon of governance as opposed to hierarchical organizational decision making” are evolving into “a new type of local governance regime.”<sup>13</sup> Analysis suggests that a form of “muddling through” at major American cities may have already produced an “evolution of a new type of local governance regime.” Of three patterns some cities have successfully used to adopt environmental sustainability policies and programs, one of them, “neighborhood associations[,] demonstrate[s] surprising levels of interaction with policymakers. Despite scant resources, neighborhood associations are clearly part of the policymaking process in urban systems.”<sup>14</sup>

The sustainability agenda, explicitly expanded to include economic and social measures, may have helped to provide the wherewithal for a robust community of resilient neighborhood-based planners and other neighborhood-based nonprofits focused on economic and equity issues to succeed in the “politics of place.”<sup>15</sup> The recent interest in U.S. cities, including New York City, in participatory budgeting, which originated in Porto Alegre, Brazil, would tend to provide some additional evidence. Yet in New York, those seeking change at the neighborhood level also have a ready-made, but poorly understood, lever—the community

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<sup>12</sup> See Municipal Art Society Planning Center on behalf of the Community-Based Planning Task Force, *Livable Neighborhoods for a Livable City*, 2005, pp. 5-8, 11-12. (<http://mas.org/presscenter/publications/>).

<sup>13</sup> Kent E. Portney and Jeffrey M. Berry, *Urban Advocacy Groups, City Governance, and the Pursuit of Sustainability in American Cities*, paper prepared for delivery at the 2010 Meetings of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., Panel 39-3 Urban Sustainability in a Changing Climate, September 5, 2010, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, abstract page.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-8.

boards, which are publicly funded City agencies representing the smallest unit of government. The City's formal planning and budgeting processes involve them in various ways. The projects discussed below suggest that policy and design can help identify ways to strengthen the functioning of this unit of government.

***Making the Invisible Visible.*** This Fall 2013 Pratt Institute design seminar class focused generally on the interdependence and interrelationship of sustainable development to global, national, regional and local programs, policies and practices. The underlying premise is that comprehensive approaches that consider both human welfare and resource limitations at the local and global levels are necessary for local planners to build and maintain sustainable communities. After the students analyzed public policies relating to the urban environment and investigated methods for creating a more sustainable future, three teams of students then focused on a specific project: *Signage for Infrastructural and Public Right of Way Projects in New York City*. Millions of New Yorkers encounter public infrastructure projects in the public right of way (PROW) every day as they navigate the City. Often these projects would benefit from further explanation by the City—the intention of either the design process or the physical manifestation of the project is not directly visible to the passerby. These countless interactions thus represent moments of opportunity for the City to engage, inform and even elicit feedback from its communities. Good signage, a definition explored during this class, can help provide this explanation and render these casual, everyday interactions into teaching moments with the potential to increase public awareness and stewardship. Three case study PROW projects in Red Hook, The Rockaways and Coney Island, communities negatively impacted by Super Storm Sandy, provided the context for the student teams to develop proposals for communities to experience, engage with and interpret these PROW projects. With assistance from City agencies and using the types of signage currently in place, the student teams generated prototype design projects aimed at increasing community outreach and education by applying their research-driven recommendations.

The Coney Island project used Kaiser Park as the site for an interactive signage system that would communicate the need for coastal infrastructure in Kaiser Park due to the vulnerable nature of the shoreline and its effect on the community, as well as include public art projects,

landscape interventions, earth art and infographics. The Red Hook project used DOT's "Look" campaign, a signage project aimed at increasing environmental awareness in crosswalks, as a model to bring attention to green infrastructure projects in Red Hook, providing an educational opportunity for the Red Hook community to learn about how stormwater is managed, how this management process is impacted during a small or large scale rain event, and what they can do in their everyday lives to ameliorate some of these impacts on the system during rain events. The Rockaways project proposed developing a connected network of interactive signage resource stations, including wayfinding, emergency response, governmental community outreach, community engagement and education features, to improve communication and preparedness by making climate change preparedness visible, providing valuable information on climate change issues while emphasizing community engagement.

***Red Hook HUB: A Creative Placemaking Project.*** This project represents an effort to demonstrate how designers can engage with the city, one community at a time. Supported by an innovation grant from Artplace, the New York chapter of the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA/NY) launched Design/Relief, a participatory design initiative, to engage with three neighborhoods—Red Hook, South Street Seaport and Rockaway—to help them imagine a more vibrant future as they overcome the lingering impact of Super Storm Sandy. Since the fall, three Design/Relief teams have conducted research, team building and concept development process, in close collaboration with community representatives. The Red Hook team conducted community design charrettes, workshops, research programs, site visits, presentations and numerous conversations with community members and stakeholders to develop the design for a community-centric information system, similar to that used by traditional bulletin boards. What emerged is the HUB, which is intended to take in, filter and share information supplied by Red Hook residents. This project shares with the Pratt studio class an acknowledgment that better local communication among residents will lead to a more resilient neighborhood. The HUB's public interfaces include physical posting boards, split into sections, including a traditional bulletin board area and a curated posting area, digital displays, mini HUBlets, which feature an edited selection of most important messages culled

from the larger system. The HUB elements are to be strategically located, based on community identified needs, and designed to function both during crisis and non-crisis times. It is planned that a committee made up of designated partners will oversee the HUB's ongoing operations.

The Design/Relief Red Hook team identified a number of potential locations for the HUB, which were supported by a research effort conducted by a studio class at Pratt Institute in the early part of the spring 2014 semester, *Mapping Red Hook*, a creative placemaking research project. The communication design field has recently evolved in conjunction with the architecture and civil engineering fields to contribute expertise in shaping the built environment with measureable impact on communities. The class applied strategic methodologies, such as spatial mapping, ethnographic research, prototyping, tracking/measuring user experience, water tables, automotive/pedestrian traffic data, interviews and co-/participatory design to identify the five key locations for the HUBs that appear to draw the highest population of Red Hook's diverse demographic. This research is intended to be open-sourced to support future projects.

**Data Driven Influence: Putting Dollars To Work at the Community Board Level.** The projects discussed above all share a focus on physical interventions at the neighborhood level and a common aim of communication at the neighborhood level driven by neighborhood residents' needs. The proposed projects all require siting on public land, including the PROW, and funding to develop, operate and maintain them. All these design projects will require intersecting with the City government at some point, yet none of them explicitly recognized the need to work with local government in general and the affected community boards in particular. This lapse can be excused in part due to the general unfamiliarity of most residents of any neighborhood with the role of the community boards in New York City. This last project, a joint public policy and design project with a multidisciplinary student team from The New School/Milano and The New School/Parsons aims at exploring how design coupled with policy analysis can help community boards leverage data to perform their Charter-mandated functions as well as to educate their residents about how community boards perform "locality coordination" functions, using the service delivery/budget function as the case study.

The Charter speaks of the community's board's function in terms of "service delivery data", a term that had an established meaning within the City before the advent of the 311 data system. In practice at the community board level, service delivery data was mix of quantitative and qualitative data, much of which originated with inquiries from residents and businesses within the community district, while 311 data is expressed entirely in a quantitative manner from the initial call to the resolution. The notion of the newer system evolved from the older system, applying technology to increase the efficiency of routing inquiries from the same types of people, but the data they each generate have become detached from each other, with the community boards' service delivery data reporting continuing as a component part of the City's overall budget process, and the centralized 311 data becoming a citywide source of accountability reporting and a public asset, subject to analyses by all. While 311 has become widely-known, due in part to the City's centralized approach to operating and publicizing it, the existence and functions of the community boards have become relatively less known even within their communities. The policy and design students have been tasked with developing a design-based approach, consistent with the policy analyses, to leverage the community board's functions so that the service delivery data they collect can help inform the community boards' budget requests up the line to the agencies, where the 311 data also resides and impacts on the agencies' budget requests, as well as permit the community boards to educate their constituents on how to interact with "City Hall" from the neighborhood level.

*Town+Gown is a systemic action research platform that links academic and practitioner resources to increase applied built environment research across disciplines and sectors, using the city's inter-related physical and social setting as a laboratory. Now in its 5<sup>th</sup> year of operation, Town+Gown has hosted 77 completed projects with 24 practitioner partners and 23 academic programs—for more information, please go to the program's website at:*

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/ddc/html/design/tg.shtml>.